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Rep. George Miller (D-CA) Opening Statement on the Hearing on “Challenges and Opportunities Facing America’s Schools and Workplace”

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), senior Democrat on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce for the hearing entitled on “Challenges and opportunities Facing America’s Schools and Workplaces.”

Good morning, Chairman Kline. Thank you for holding this hearing.

I would like to welcome Governor Herbert and all of our witnesses to the committee. I’m looking forward to your testimony.

By many measures, the American economy has been slowly but surely recovering from the Great Recession.

Corporate profits are up. The Dow Jones is booming. We’ve seen an average of 180,000 jobs created each month last year.

Nevertheless, many working families continue to struggle with unemployment or stagnant wages.

I hope we can all agree that a fair and sustainable recovery is one that is broadly shared by those who help to create it.

On that front, we still have much work to do.

We in Congress – and on this committee in particular – have a role to play. If we want to help this recovery along and build for the future, there are some things we need to be doing.

First, we need to make and protect critical investments in people. I’m talking about the sorts of investments that put the American Dream within reach of every individual.

This begins with reforming our education system so that every child regardless of their background has the opportunity to succeed.

From a child’s earliest years all the way to higher education, quality instruction with high standards pays off in both economic and social terms.

But at this time, states, school districts and teachers are being held back by the failure of this Congress to rewrite No Child Left Behind.

The Department of Education's waiver program has provided important breathing room for states but cannot be the substitute for Congress updating the law to meet the high skill and critical thinking demands of the new economy.

Additionally, we must maintain a laser-like focus on equity to ensure our education system remains an economic driver.

And we need to invest in rebuilding and modernizing our schools and community colleges. An investment like that will create good jobs in construction right now, while providing American students with modern learning environments for the long-run.

We also know that a strong economy depends on whether we are giving all Americans access to the higher education or job training necessary to compete in the global economy.

The share of American jobs that require some postsecondary education will increase to 63 percent by 2018, not even a decade from now.

But college tuition continues to grow faster than the economy. Community colleges are oversubscribed and underfunded.

Addressing access and affordability needs to be a priority, just as completing a rewrite of the Workforce Investment Act.

Both sides of the aisle agree that workforce training programs should be better aligned to meet worker and employer needs.

If we agree, then let's do something about it.

Let's make sure there is a seamless partnership among workforce boards, local community colleges, businesses and workers.

Let's make sure that there is real accountability for these programs and ensure that all stakeholders can participate.

And let's make sure there are sufficient resources available so that these programs work.

Better educational and training opportunities will help to reduce inequalities in the economy. But creating those opportunities are insufficient by themselves.

That's why Congress must address the growing gap between working peoples' wages and corporate profits, between rising productivity and falling compensation.

For decades, when workers' productivity rose, so did their wages, creating and sustaining the American middle class.

But that link was broken over the last few decades. Working people are not sharing in the prosperity they help to create.

Today, those who suffered the least during the Great Recession are the ones benefitting from the most.

Wages for the top one percent have grown by 8.2 percent during the 2009 to 2011 recovery. But, wages for the 90 percent fell 1.2 percent over the same time.

This is not sustainable. A vibrant economy and a strong democracy cannot survive if all the economic gains go to the very few at the very top.

Finally, Congress must end this whole notion of governing fiscal cliff to fiscal cliff.

Governing from one artificially created crisis to another is no way to instill certainty for businesses or confidence for consumers. Instead, it has done great harm to the nation's recovery.

It started with the brinksmanship during the 2011 debt ceiling debacle.

Consumer confidence plummeted by 25 percent in August 2011. Economic growth and job growth slowed by almost half.

And the debate resulted in America's credit rating being lowered for the first time in history.

Then, as last year's fiscal cliff loomed, we saw similar pullbacks. The National Association of Business Economics recently reported that "uncertainties surrounding the fiscal cliff led to postponed hiring and capital spending in the last three months of 2012."

More than a quarter of businesses reported that they "postponed some or all hiring in the 4th quarter."

The proof is in the pudding. Governing by crisis hurts our economy.

Even worse, the artificial crises are designed to force an agenda of austerity on the country, at a time that our economy can ill afford it.

In Great Britain, we can see the results of a hard-headed austerity agenda.

They are heading for a triple-dip recession, and their debt problems are only getting worse. Despite the drastic cuts, their debt level has risen from 61 percent of GDP to 84 percent of GDP.

What America needs is growth, not a double-dip or triple-dip recession.

- Growth that will both create good jobs and reduce the deficit;
- Growth that encourages a fair and sustainable recovery that rebuilds the ladders of opportunity for every American.

The American people aren't interested in another year of artificial crisis after artificial crisis. I'm not interested either.

I understand there are real policy differences regarding the challenges I mentioned earlier. But bipartisan consensus on some of these issues should be possible.

The American people expect this body to try to find that common ground.

This committee should be in the business of advancing policy that becomes law and makes a real difference in working families' lives.

I hope our witnesses will help us identify where the challenges and opportunities lie, where we can work together to make that difference.

Thank you and I yield back.

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